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TALE OF SAND

IN THE

THERE ARE TALES THAT ARE TOLD MANY TIMES.

SOME TALES YOU TELL CHILDREN, STORIES THAT TELL THEM THE HISTORY OF THE TRIBE, WHAT IS GOOD TO EAT, WHAT IS NOT. CAUTIONARY TALES.

THERE ARE THE TALES THE WOMEN TELL, IN THE PRIVATE TONGUE MEN-CHILDREN ARE NEVER TAUGHT AND OLDER MEN ARE TOO WISE TO LEARN, AND THESE TALES ARE NOT TOLD TO MEN.

THERE ARE THE TALES THE MEN TELL EACH OTHER, IN THE MEN'S HUT AT NIGHT; CRUDE RAUCOUS TALES, OF THE LIZARD WHO LOST HIS MALE MEMBER, OR OF THE MALABAYO, THE TRICKSTER, WHO SOLD APE DUNG TO KING LION, TELLING HIM IT WAS THE SOUL OF THE MOON.

THERE ARE THE TALES THE WHOLE TRIBE TELL EACH OTHER, AT FESTIVALS, AT FEASTS: THE STORY OF THE ROCK THAT JUMPED, OF HOW FIRE CAME, A THOUSAND OTHERS.

LOW TALES. HIGH TALES. TALES THAT ARE TOLD AND HEARD MANY, MANY TIMES.

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ONE TALE IS ONLY EVER TOLD ONCE.

THE YOUNG ONE STILL FEELS SORE FROM THE CIRCUMCISION, BUT HE BEARS IT WITH THE PRIDE OF HIS NEWFOUND MANHOOD.

THEY HAVE WALKED FOR TWO DAYS.

WHEN HE RETURNS TO THE TRIBE HE WILL TRULY BE A MAN: HE WILL HAVE HEARD THE TALE. AT NIGHT HE WILL SLEEP IN THE YOUNG MEN'S HUT...

ENOUGH.

THIS IS THE PLACE.

GIVE ME THE FIREWOOD.

NOW, YOU MUST GO AND FIND SOMETHING, AND BRING IT BACK TO ME. AND WHEN YOU HAVE BROUGHT IT TO ME I WILL TELL YOU THE TALE.

WHILE YOU ARE LOOKING, I WILL MAKE THE FIRE.

BUT GRANDFATHER... *WHAT* MUST I FIND?

YOU WILL KNOW IT WHEN YOU FIND IT.

NOW GO, HURRY. NIGHT IS COMING, AND I MUST BEGIN THE TALE BEFORE THE SUN SETS.

HAI! GRANDFATHER, I HAVE FOUND IT!

BUT WHAT IS IT?

GIVE IT TO ME.

THE OLD MAN TOUCHES THE GLASS.

HE REMEMBERS, FLEETINGLY, THE TIME HIS MOTHER'S BROTHER TOOK HIM OUT TO THIS PLACE, SENT HIM TO FIND A SIMILAR SHARD...

AND THEN HE BEGINS TO TELL THE TALE.

THIS GLASS WAS ONCE PART OF A CITY. IF YOU LOOK AROUND IN THIS PLACE YOU WILL FIND OTHER SHARDS LIKE IT.

IT IS FORBIDDEN TO TAKE THEM FROM THIS PLACE.

I WILL TELL YOU OF THAT CITY, AND OF HOW IT WAS LOST TO US...

AND ONE DAY, IF YOU LIVE LONG ENOUGH, YOU WILL BRING ONE OTHER OUT HERE, AND TELL HIM THE TALE.

FOR THIS IS THE WAY IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN. EACH OF US HEARS THE TALE ONCE, IN THIS PLACE. AND EACH OF US TELLS THE STORY ONCE IN THIS PLACE...

...IF GRANDMOTHER DEATH SPARES US LONG ENOUGH TO TELL IT...

LISTEN.

THIS PLACE WAS NO DESERT THEN. FERTILE IT WAS, WITH MANY FRUIT TREES, AND FAT, SLOW ANIMALS EVERYWHERE, SO THAT HUNTING WAS EASY.

IF YOU SIMPLY CLOSED YOUR EYES AND THREW YOUR SPEAR, WHY, THERE WOULD BE SOMETHING GOOD TO EAT ON THE END OF IT.

AND IN THIS PLACE, WHERE WE NOW SIT, THERE WAS A CITY.

IT WAS A CITY BUILT OF GLASS, A CITY THAT SPREAD OUT FARTHER THAN A MAN COULD WALK IN A DAY. FOR THIS IS THE PLACE THAT THE FIRST PEOPLE BEGAN...

...AND THE FIRST PEOPLE WERE OF OUR TRIBE.

THAT IS OUR SECRET, AND WE NEVER TELL OUTSIDERS, FOR THEY WOULD KILL US IF THEY KNEW.

BUT IT IS THE TRUTH.

AND IN THAT CITY THERE RULED A QUEEN. SHE WAS CALLED NADA.

BY THE TIME SHE REACHED HER SIXTEENTH YEAR SHE WAS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN THE SUN HAD EVER SEEN IN HIS TRAVELS ACROSS THE SKY.

AND SHE RULED WISELY, AND SHE RULED WELL, AND WHEN SHE SAID, DO THIS, THEN IT WAS DONE.

BUT SHE HAD NO MAN.

FOR WHEN THE WOMEN OF THE TRIBE WOULD SAY TO HER THAT SHE SHOULD TAKE A HUSBAND, SHE WOULD TURN FROM THEM AND SAY,

WHERE, THEN, IS THE MAN FOR ME?

...AND THE WOMEN WOULD ALL FALL SILENT.

ONE DAY A STRANGER CAME TO THE CITY. TALL HE WAS, AND DRESSED ALL IN BLACK; FLAMES DANCED IN THE BLACKNESS OF HIS ROBE, AND HIS EYES WERE STARS IN DEEP POOLS OF DARK WATER.

AND HE SAID NOTHING TO ANY MAN.

BUT THAT NIGHT HE CAME TO THE FOOT OF THE QUEEN'S TOWER (FOR THE HOUSES OF THAT CITY ROSE INTO THE SKY), AND HE LOOKED UP.

AND NADA LOOKED OUT OF HER WINDOW, AND SHE SAW HIM BELOW HER, AND HER HEART WAS STOLEN AWAY.

THAT NIGHT THE QUEEN DID NOT SLEEP.

WHEN MORNING CAME SHE ORDERED THAT THE STRANGER BE BROUGHT TO HER, BUT THE STRANGER WAS NOWHERE TO BE FOUND IN THE CITY.

THE QUEEN ORDERED THAT MEN GO OUT AND FIND THE STRANGER. AND THEY HUNTED IN THE FORESTS AND ON THE MOUNTAINS, AND IN THE DESERTS, BUT THEY COULD NOT FIND THE MAN.

AND NADA WEPT INSIDE, FOR SHE KNEW THAT SHE HAD FOUND HER LOVE, AND LOST HIM.

SHE WENT INTO THE FOREST, UNTIL SHE FOUND THE KING OF THE BIRDS. AND SHE TOLD THE KING OF THE BIRDS HER STORY.

BE HE MAN, OR BE HE GOD...

(FOR IN THOSE DAYS THE GODS STILL WALKED THE EARTH, AND WORE FLESH, AND THEY MADE THEIR HOMES IN THE HOT LANDS OF THE NORTH)

...I WILL FIND HIM FOR YOU, NADA, FOR ARE WE NOT KINGS AND QUEENS TOGETHER?

AND THE GREAT BIRD SUMMONED ALL THE BIRDS OF THE AIR TO HIS THRONE, AND HE DEMANDED OF ALL OF THEM,

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?

AND EACH BIRD SAID "NO", UNTIL IT SEEMED THAT THERE WERE NO BIRDS LEFT.

BUT THERE WAS ONE MORE BIRD, A WHITE WEAVERBIRD, SO TINY THEY HAD OVERLOOKED IT.

"LITTLE WEAVERBIRD," SAID THE BIRD KING, "HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?"

THE LITTLE BIRD NODDED. SHE HAD SEEN THE MAN, LATE ONE NIGHT, BENEATH THE MOON. HE HAD SMILED AT HER, AND GIVEN HER GRAIN TO EAT.

THEN HE HAD VANISHED.

THE BIRD KING NODDED.

SO, THIS IS NO MAN, NO GOD, BUT SOMETHING ELSE. FORGET HIM, NADA. FIND A BREATHING MAN, MADE OF BLOOD AND BONE AND FLESH AND SKIN.

THIS OTHER CAN NEVER BE YOURS.

AND NADA LOWERED HER HEAD, AND SHE LEFT THAT PLACE.

BUT THE WEAVERBIRD FOLLOWED HER. AND THE WEAVERBIRD SAID TO HER,

I HAVE HEARD THAT THERE IS A TREE THAT GROWS ON THE MOUNTAINS OF THE SUN. AND ON THAT TREE GROW BERRIES OF FLAME.

"...AND IF A HUMAN WERE TO SWALLOW A BERRY FROM THE TREE, IT WOULD TAKE THEM TO THE SIDE OF THEIR TRUE LOVE."

"HOW AM I TO GET A BERRY FROM THAT TREE?" NADA ASKED THE WEAVERBIRD.

...AND THE LITTLE BIRD SAID, "I WILL FETCH IT FOR YOU."

THE LITTLE BIRD FLEW UP INTO THE SKY. IT FLEW SO HIGH IT VANISHED FROM SIGHT, WHILE THE QUEEN WAITED BELOW.

FOR A DAY SHE WAITED, AND AT THE END OF THE DAY SHE SAW A TINY SPECK IN THE SKY ABOVE HER.

IT WAS THE WEAVERBIRD, BUT IT HAD BEEN BURNT A DEEP BROWN BY THE HEAT OF THE SUN, AND IN ITS BEAK IT CARRIED A BERRY FROM THE TREES THAT GROW ON THE MOUNTAINS OF THE SUN.

(THAT IS WHY TO THIS DAY THE WEAVERBIRD IS BROWN.)

THE WEAVERBIRD DROPPED THE FLAMING BERRY OF THE SUN-TREE ON THE GROUND IN FRONT OF NADA. AND THE QUEEN PICKED UP THE WEAVER-BIRD, AND SAID TO IT...

FOR WHAT YOU HAVE DONE, NO ONE OF THIS LAND WILL EVER HARM YOU OR YOUR KIND, LITTLE BIRD.

SO IT IS FORBIDDEN TO EAT WEAVERBIRD FLESH, OR TO HARM A WEAVERBIRD, AND THAT IS WHY WE LET THEM WEAVE THEIR NESTS IN OUR VILLAGES.

AND NADA WENT BACK TO HER PALACE...

AND SHE WENT TO HER ROOM, AND SHE SWALLOWED THE FIRE-BERRY, THOUGH IT SEARED HER THROAT. AND SHE FELL DOWN, AS IF IN A DEEP SLEEP...

...AND HER SOUL WAS PULLED OUT OF HER, AND HER SPIRIT WENT WALKING.

IT SEEMED TO HER THAT SHE WAS IN A DARKENED WORLD.

AND THERE CAME CLOSE TO HER TWO MEN, TWO BROTHERS, AND THEY WERE ARGUING ABOUT A SACRIFICE THEY HAD GIVEN, FOR ONE OF THE MEN HAD GIVEN MEAT, AND THE OTHER HAD GIVEN FRUIT.

AND THEY BEGAN TO FIGHT.

PRESENTLY ONE BROTHER KILLED THE OTHER, AND WALKED ON DOWN THE ROAD.

THEN SHE SAID TO THE BROTHER WHO WAS DEAD,

WHAT IS THIS PLACE?

"THIS IS THE DREAMWORLD, LADY," HE TOLD HER. "THIS IS THE REALM OF SLEEP AND DREAM, RULED BY KAI'CKUL, THE LORD OF DREAMS.

"THAT HOUSE IS HIS HOUSE."

SHE WALKED UP TO THE HOUSE, AND WENT IN TO IT. THE GUARDIANS LET HER PASS, BECAUSE THEY COULD FEEL THE FLAMING BERRY INSIDE HER.

IN THE THRONE ROOM SHE SAW KAI'CKUL, THE DREAM LORD, ON HIS THRONE, AND HIS HEAD WAS HIDDEN. HE SAID TO HER,

Who are you? Why have you come here?

I SEEK A STRANGER, FOR I LOVE HIM. FLAMES DANCE IN THE BLACKNESS OF HIS ROBE, AND HIS EYES ARE STARS IN POOLS OF DEEP WATER.

HE CAME TO MY TOWER ONE NIGHT, AND LOOKED UP AT ME, BUT HE SAID NOTHING.

AT THIS, KAI'CKUL REMOVED HIS HELMET, AND SHE SAW BEFORE HER THE STRANGER WHO HAD STOOD BENEATH HER HOUSE IN THE CITY OF GLASS.

AND HER HEART SANK WITHIN HER, FOR SHE HAD CONFESSED HER LOVE TO ONE OF THE ENDLESS, WHO ARE NOT GODS, AND WILL NEVER DIE LIKE GODS.

AND IN THE TWIN STARS OF HIS EYES SHE SAW HE LOVED HER TOO.

TERROR SEIZED HER HEART.

AND SHE COUGHED AND COUGHED UNTIL SHE COUGHED UP THE BERRY OF THE TREE THAT GROWS ON THE MOUNTAINS OF THE SUN, COUGHED IT ONTO THE FLOOR OF THE DREAM LORD'S THRONE ROOM.

AND SHE AWOKE TO HER OWN ROOM. STANDING BESIDE HER WAS THE DREAMLORD.

Why did you hunt me?

HE ASKED HER.

Why do you flee me?

I HUNTED YOU BECAUSE I LOVE YOU MORE THAN MORTAL MAN HAS EVER BEEN LOVED BY WOMAN.

AND I FLED YOU BECAUSE IT IS NOT GIVEN TO MORTALS TO LOVE THE ENDLESS.

ONLY DISASTER CAN FOLLOW FROM IT-- DISASTER FOR YOU, DISASTER FOR ME, DISASTER FOR MY PEOPLE.

BUT KAI'CKUL SHOOK HIS HEAD.

"NEVER HAS ONE LOVED ME ENOUGH TO SEEK ME OUT..!"

Never have I seen another woman I would take for my own. I would marry you, Nada, and make you queen of my Dreamworld...

...to rule the dreams of all that dream by my side, to be with me forever, never to die as mankind knows death.

And this I swear by the ruby on my chest.

AND AT THIS NADA WAS DEATHLY AFRAID, FOR THOUGH SHE LOVED HIM, SHE KNEW THIS WAS NOT MEANT TO BE, AND SHE COULD NOT COUNTENANCE HIS DESTRUCTION, AND HERS.

FOR LOVE IS NO PART OF THE DREAM-WORLD. LOVE BELONGS TO DESIRE, AND DESIRE IS ALWAYS CRUEL.

SO NADA TOOK THE FORM OF A GAZELLE AND SHE RAN UNTIL SHE COULD RUN NO MORE.

BUT HE CAME AFTER HER AS A HUNTER, AND SLEW THE GAZELLE.

THEN SHE TOOK ON HER OWN FORM AGAIN AND RAN INTO THE WASTELAND.

STILL HE PURSUED HER. SHE CLIMBED A HIGH MOUNTAIN, BUT STILL HE CAME ON.

"HE WANTS ME TO BE HIS BRIDE," SHE THOUGHT, "SO IF I GIVE UP MY VIRGINITY HE WILL NOT WANT ME."

AND SHE TOOK A SHARP ROCK, AND WITH IT SHE TOOK HER MAIDENHEAD...

...AND SHE SPILT HER VIRGIN BLOOD ON THE EARTH. WHERE THE BLOOD FELL RED FLOWERS GREW.

AND SHE TURNED AND KAI'CKUL STOOD THERE BEFORE HER.

YOU KNOW I AM NOW NO VIRGIN?

..SHE SAID, EXPECTING HIM TO LEAVE HER BE.

I am no mortal man, and I love you as no mortal man could love...

What matters your body to me?

AND HE TOUCHED HER SEX WITH HIS HAND, AND AT HIS TOUCH SHE WAS HEALED, AND THE PAIN LEFT HER, AND THE WOUND WAS HEALED, THOUGH HER MAIDENHEAD WAS NOT RESTORED.

THEN HE TOOK HER HAND, AND HE DREW HER INTO THE DARKNESS OF HIS ROBE, AND THERE, IN THE FLAMES AND THE DARKNESS, THEY MADE LOVE.

ALL THAT NIGHT THEY STAYED TOGETHER, AND EVERY LIVING THING THAT DREAMED, DREAMED THAT NIGHT OF HER FACE, AND OF HER BODY, AND OF THE WARM, SALT TASTE OF HER SWEAT AND HER SKIN...

AND EVERY LIVING THING THAT COULD DREAM DREAMED OF LOVE.

WHEN THE SUN AROSE THAT MORNING, AND SAW THE TWO OF THEM TOGETHER, IT KNEW THAT SOMETHING THAT WAS NOT MEANT TO BE HAD HAPPENED.

AND A BLAZING FIREBALL FELL FROM THE SUN AND BURNT UP THE CITY OF GLASS, RAZING IT TO THE GROUND, LEAVING JUST A DESERT.

--A DESERT STREWN WITH SHARDS OF GLASS, JUST LIKE THIS ONE.

FROM THE MOUNTAINTOP NADA SAW THE SUN THROW DOWN THE FIREBALL, SAW HER CITY MELT, SAW HER LAND BECOME A PARCHED WASTELAND.

"THIS IS BECAUSE OF WHAT WE DID," SHE SAID TO HIM, "AND WORSE WILL COME IF I STAY BY YOUR SIDE."

AND THEN SHE TOOK THE DREAMLORD, HER LOVER, BY THE HAND, AS LOVERS DO.

SHE PRESSED HERSELF TO HIM.

THEN SHE RELEASED HIS HAND, AND BEFORE HE KNEW WHAT SHE WAS ABOUT, NADA THREW HERSELF OFF THE MOUNTAINTOP, AND HER BODY WAS DASHED TO DEATH ON THE ROCKS BELOW.

AND THIS IS ALSO IN THE TALE, AND THIS IS THE WAY MY MOTHER'S BROTHER TOLD THIS TO ME, AND HIS FATHER TOLD IT TO HIM...

...AND BACK AND BACK THROUGH UNCOUNTED GENERATIONS.

AFTER NADA DIED, HER SPIRIT AWOKE TO ITSELF IN THE FOREST ON THE BORDERS OF THE REALM OF DEATH.

AND SHE KNEW THERE WAS ONE STANDING BEHIND HER, AND SHE TURNED, AND THE DREAM LORD WAS THERE.

You hurt me. You could have been my Queen, but instead you chose the realm of Grandmother Death.

NADA HUNG HER HEAD LOW.

Once more I will offer my love to you, once more, and that is all.

If you refuse me a third time, I will condemn your soul to eternal pain.

So I ask you, sweet love, for the last time; will you be my queen?

"ANSWER ME," SAID KAI'CKUL, THE DREAM LORD, TO THE DEAD QUEEN.

HOW CAN I BE YOUR QUEEN?

SHE ASKED HIM.

FOR MY PEOPLE ARE NO MORE BECAUSE OF WHAT I DID, AND MY CITY IS A WASTE...

IF I WERE TO STAY WITH YOU, STILL DARKER THINGS WOULD HAPPEN. MORTALS DO NOT MARRY THE ENDLESS, MY LOVE.

NOW, LEAVE ME TO THE REALM OF GRANDMOTHER DEATH, DREAMLORD, AND FORGET ME.

AND SHE WALKED DOWN THE SUNLESS ROAD INTO THE REALM OF GRANDMOTHER DEATH.

BUT HE CAUGHT UP WITH HER.

"PLEASE," SHE BEGGED HIM.

DO NOT ASK ME AGAIN TO BE YOUR BRIDE.

FOR IF YOU ASK ME, I MUST REFUSE YOU AGAIN, AND IF I DO THAT YOU WILL CONDEMN ME TO ETERNAL SUFFERING.

SO LEAVE ME, LORD.

BUT THE DREAM LORD IS A PROUD ONE.

AND, FOR THE LAST TIME, HE ASKED HER TO BE HIS BRIDE...

WHAT HAPPENED THEN?

THAT IS THE STORY. THAT *IS* ALL THERE IS.

WHAT DID NADA *SAY* WHEN KAI'CKUL ASKED HER FOR THE LAST TIME?

WHAT *HAPPENED?*

THAT IS THE WAY MY UNCLE TOLD IT TO ME, THE WAY HIS FATHER TOLD IT TO HIM, THE WAY YOU, TOO, MUST TELL IT, IN YOUR TURN.

BUT--THAT'S NOT A REAL STORY. IT DOESN'T *END* PROPERLY!

...SHE SAID *NO.* WHAT ELSE *COULD* SHE SAY?

HERE. TAKE THIS SHARD OF GLASS, PUT IT DOWN SOMEWHERE.

PERHAPS YOUR SON, OR YOUR GRANDSON WILL FIND IT, WHEN YOU BRING *HIM* OUT HERE TO TELL HIM THE TALE.

THE FIRE HAS BURNT OUT, AND THE SUN WILL RISE SOON. NOW WE MUST MAKE OUR WAY BACK TO THE TRIBE.

YOU HAVE LOST YOUR FORESKIN, AND YOU HAVE HEARD THE TALE.

THAT MAKES YOU TRULY A MAN.

LET US GO. THE TALE IS OVER, AND MY BONES GROW COLD.

THERE IS ANOTHER VERSION OF THE TALE.

THAT IS THE TALE THE WOMEN TELL EACH OTHER, IN THEIR PRIVATE LANGUAGE THAT THE MEN-CHILDREN ARE NOT TAUGHT, AND THAT THE OLD MEN ARE TOO WISE TO LEARN.

AND IN THAT VERSION OF THE TALE PERHAPS THINGS HAPPENED DIFFERENTLY.

BUT THEN, THAT IS A WOMEN'S TALE, AND IT IS NEVER TOLD TO MEN.

FIN

SON OF ULTRON